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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: SPEAKER BERRI LASHES OUT AFTER TRIBUNAL
PASSAGE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b)
) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri lashed out at CODEL Leahy and the Ambassador during a meeting on 5/31, the day after Chapter VII adoption of UNSCR 1757 to create an international tribunal. Berri's advisor, before the meeting, highlighted to Emboffs the communique Berri had just issued, which denied that he had obstructed establishment of the tribunal, and accused the March 14 group and its supporters of sowing sectarian tensions. The tribunal changes nothing, Berri told the CODEL, responding to their attempts to convince him to convene parliament or present a new plan for resolving the political impasse. Berri implicitly criticized the United States, saying that March 14 would not have remained in power without the help of foreign allies. He asked that the U.S. urge March 14 to compromise with the opposition, and that the U.S. expand its dialogue with Iran to encompass Sunni extremist threats in Afghanistan, the Gulf, and the Palestinian territories. End Summary.

BERRI LASHES OUT, DENIES
HE OBSTRUCTED TRIBUNAL PASSAGE

¶2. (C) Speaker Berri and his Amal advisor Ali Hamdan held a nervous and emotional meeting with CODEL Leahy on May 31 following passage of UNSCR 1757 to create an international tribunal to try suspects in the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and others. The meeting came on the final day of the official parliamentary session that Berri refused to convene. Despite being responsible for the closure of parliament, Berri has expressed fear that President Lahoud would call for the dissolution of Parliament and the removal of Berri as Speaker if he did not convene the parliament before the end of its spring session.

¶3. (C) Before the meeting began, Hamdan highlighted to Emboffs the communique Berri had issued earlier in the day denying Ambassador Khalilzad's and the British Ambassador's charges that Berri had misused his position as Speaker to obstruct Lebanon's constitutional process for establishing a tribunal. The communique went on to accuse March 14 and its supporters of "sowing sedition" and provoking sectarian tensions in Lebanon. Hamdan further tried to play on fear, predicting that passage of the tribunal will usher in a more destructive era in Lebanese politics. He compared the ten days following passage of the tribunal to the last ten days of the July-August war with Israel; Lebanon suffered

one-third of its war damage during the last ten days of conflict.

BERRI STILL REFUSES
TO CONVENE PARLIAMENT

14. (C) The tribunal changes nothing, Berri told the delegation, responding to their attempts to convince him to convene parliament or present a new plan for resolving the political impasse. Senator Leahy asked whether Berri intended to convene parliament to allow the Lebanese constitutional process to proceed through a review the tribunal legislation before the UNSCR activates it automatically on June 10. Berri once again blamed the March 14 majority for refusing to form a new national unity cabinet, and asserted that he was ready to solve all Lebanon's problems within 14 days, including the tribunal, as soon as the GOL formed such a new cabinet.

15. (C) Senator Cardin reminded Berri that the international community had given Lebanon one more chance to put together an internal process to pass the tribunal, and asked whether Berri preferred external imposition to Lebanese creation of such an inevitable tribunal. Berri could only summon yet again his argument that he could not convene the parliament and allow it to recognize an illegitimate cabinet that did not reflect a national consensus and the participation of all sects. Berri blamed the March 14 majority for not giving the opposition adequate time to review tribunal documents last November, thus prompting their resignation. Berri denied that the resigned ministers, whose resignations have never been accepted, are still cashing their paychecks. He also criticized foreign officials who met with those ministers

BEIRUT 00000771 002 OF 002

acting in place of the resigned officials.

BERRI LASHES OUT AT
US SUPPORT TO MARCH 14

16. (C) Berri implicitly criticized the United States, saying that March 14 would not be in power to this day without the help of foreign allies. He reminded the CODEL that he had helped negotiate the release of over 100 Americans on a hijacked TWA flight in 1983 but was later accused of complicity with the hijackers. His bitterness at that incident has kept him from traveling to the United States since then, Berri told us. (Note: Other sources tell us that Berri, once a green-card holder, allowed anti-American sentiment in his Amal party to forestall any travel to the U.S. for several years, thereby compromising his status as a legal permanent resident. End Note.)

17. (C) Senator Leahy asked Berri: does your resentment of U.S. interference extend to the \$770 million in aid the Congress approved and the President signed earlier this week?

Berri, who stated that he was completely unaware of the large aid package, ardently defended his right to criticize U.S. policy while accepting U.S. military and economic aid, and even technical assistance to his closed parliament.

BERRI URGES LESS SUPPORT TO
MARCH 14, MORE DIALOGUE WITH IRAN

18. (C) Berri was unable to lay out any plan for moving Lebanon forward. Despite the efforts of several senators to draw out his thoughts, Berri could only urge the CODEL not to back what he implied is a Sunni-dominated government, and instead to pressure that government to compromise with the opposition. Recent history shows that societies that allow one sect to rule prompt terrorism and confrontation, Berri argued. In addition, Lebanon's democracy, more than others, requires consensus among all sects. Finally, such consensus

could also be the model for the multi-sectarian countries of Israel and Iraq.

¶9. (C) Responding to Senator Salazar's attempt to refocus Berri on how to reach our common goal of a peaceful and prosperous Middle East, Berri argued that the U.S. should work for national reconciliation in Lebanon and, more importantly, expand its dialogue with Iran. Talking about Iraq is not enough, Berri argued, and the U.S. has a common interest in working with Iran against Sunni extremists in Afghanistan, the Gulf, and in the Palestinian community. It is most dangerous for a state to cut off dialogue with those parties with whom it disagrees, Berri opined, as they are the one with whom dialogue is most needed.

¶10. (C) CODEL Leahy did not have a chance to clear this cable before departing post.
FELTMAN